
ONLINE FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING**Asst. Prof. Lela Ivanovska, Ph.D,**

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Abstract

Due to the newly occurred state of emergency caused by the COVID-19 virus outbreak worldwide, the classical Macedonian education process has been currently stopped at all education levels. In an attempt to ensure the continuity of the teaching process, many of the higher education institutions have adapted their educational offer to online activities. This also includes virtual classes for the foreign languages taught at university level through the use of distance learning Internet tools.

The aim of this research was to analyze the students' experience in the foreign language (English and French) online classes offered during the COVID-19 pandemic at several Macedonian higher education institutions. The research is based on a tailor-made questionnaire in which the students were asked to state their opinions on the organization of the online classes, the electronic platforms used in the process of online teaching, the scope of the lectures, the type of class activities, etc. The questionnaire was also intended to explore the students' motivation to follow the virtual language classes, the advantages and disadvantages of the virtual classes, especially, when compared to the classical way of teaching, as well as the difficulties the students face in the online learning process.

The results of the research indicate that although a high percentage of the students are motivated to partake actively in the process of online learning/teaching, still, their preference goes on the side of traditional classroom teaching and learning. The findings also point to the necessity of improving a range of aspects of online foreign language teaching in order to overcome the current obstacles and to eliminate all its present weak spots.

Keywords: foreign language, online classes, higher education, advantages, disadvantages.

Introduction

During the first half of the year 2020, the education in almost all countries worldwide faced a major challenge due to the global pandemic caused by the virus Covid-19. In order not to disrupt the continuity of the education process, most of the universities opted for replacing the traditional classroom teaching with online (distant) teaching. Given the urgency of the situation the transition from traditional to distant mode of teaching was conducted in a rather abrupt and improvised manner, i.e. without any prior planning and even a possibility to previously appraise and gauge the advantages and disadvantages of the currently available

online teaching platforms. This, in turn, meant that the teaching staff, in general, received practically no specialized training for this new mode of teaching.

Slightly baffled at first by the newly arisen circumstances, the Macedonian university foreign language teachers almost immediately accepted the challenge to make use of the new technologies in order to realize their foreign language classes online.

Nevertheless, as the two-month period of online teaching and the 2020 spring semester were drawing to their end, a lot of questions of great importance to all university foreign language emerged: “Have we maintained both the continuity and quality of teaching with the online classes?”; “How do our students feel about online foreign language teaching and learning?”; “Can online teaching be a real substitute for traditional classroom teaching?”; “What aspects of online teaching can be improved if online teaching is to be used again in the upcoming academic semesters?”, etc.

In order to provide answers to these highly relevant questions, the study at hand placed the focus on the students’ experiences and viewpoints regarding the foreign language classes they attended online from March to the end of May, 2020. The study is based on a tailor-made questionnaire whose purpose was to elicit answers from the students as to how motivated they felt to study a foreign language online; what obstacles, if any, they came across in the course of their online foreign language classes as well as what the advantages and disadvantages of online foreign language teaching and learning were.

Theoretical background

The advent of online teaching and learning happened in the second half of the 20th century. More precisely, in 1982, the Western Behavioral Sciences Institute in La Jolla, California, opened its School of Management and Strategic Studies for implementing online learning (Feenberg, 1993). Also, the system of education at the Open University in Britain has always been primarily focused on e-learning. The first correspondence courses materials were delivered by post. With technology improvement, the Open University began to offer faster correspondence with students via email etc.¹

¹The history of e-learning. Available at <https://www.talentlms.com/elearning/history-of-elearning>. Accessed on 15th May, 2020

²Introduction to online teaching and learning. Available at <http://www.wlac.edu/online/documents/otl.pdf>. Accessed on 15th May, 2020

In the course of the last decade of the 20th century and the first decades of the 21st century online learning and teaching has gradually developed and several types of distance learning have emerged:

- Correspondence Courses: using mail with little interaction;
- Telecourses: delivering content via television broadcast or radio;
- CD-ROM Courses: interaction with static computer content;
- Online Learning: synchronously and/or asynchronously communication;
- Mobile Learning: including devices such as PDAs, cellular phones and digital audio players (iPods, MP3 players).²

The introduction of online teaching is in great part due to how well teachers engage with the new ideas and implement them with their learners. After all, teachers are often viewed by learners as the embodiment of the course, one of the key components which can make or break their whole learning experience (Freeman, 1997); thus the online teacher becomes ‘a critical factor in learner acceptance of online-learning’ (McPherson & Nunes, 2004). Teachers are instrumental in shaping learners’ perceptions (McPherson & Nunes, 2004), so the way in which teachers present and use the different components and tools of a course will greatly influence learners’ perceptions of how important and useful these components and tools are. Teachers need to be trained to become confident users and effective supporters of their students, and both teachers and learners alike need to know not only how to use new technologies but also why they should use them (Kirkwood & Price, 2005).

Online education requires careful planning, and the resulting course design should be innovative and allow learners to interact with each other and the materials (Porter, 2004, p. 28). According to Hall et al. (2001) the framework for web-based learning design, consists of seven components: directionality, usability, consistency, interactivity, multimodality, adaptability, and accountability. They propose that effective design begins with clear delineation of the intended audience, usage context, and learning goals and that all further design occurs within the context of these factors (i.e. directionality). The design factors themselves can be seen as representing the fundamental contrasting goals of simplicity (usability and consistency) and complexity (interactivity, multimodality and adaptability) (Clarke & Hermens, 2001) posited that online learning is student-centered because students can control their own learning pace, and the activities can be flexible so as to better suit students’ preferred learning style. Online learning also creates opportunities for active learning (Dolence & Norris, 1995). In addition, with good online learning applications or software, students have opportunities to participate in discussions, to express their opinions, and to share their knowledge equally regardless of

classroom size and time (Harasim, Calvert & Groeneboer, 1997). The online teaching and learning environment make learners face some challenges too. Thus, learners need higher cognitive ability to deal with the more multi-dimensional learning tasks and complex content (Tyler-Smith, 2006), learners then need to monitor and self-regulate their learning by setting up a learning schedule to ensure they can complete all the lessons (Tsai, 2009) and Internet skills (Ekizoglu & Ozcinar, 2010; Saadé & Kira, 2009). For some learners, these challenges might necessitate deploying a different learning style. For the learners who are less skilled in the use of technology, online learning can be rather problematic (Kearns, 2012; Lee, 2001).

In language learning context, online-learning is available to learners in a way that they can make use of it individually based on their personal needs or as a way to enhance formal education; that is, it is used as a supplementary learning environment embedded into formal instruction (Tallent-Runnels et al. 2006; Gluchmanova, 2015). In fact, online-learning offers more practice opportunities and varied audio-visual aids enabling learners to practice the language they learn as well as more online learning tasks for learners to engage (Anderson, 2003). The introduction of online-learning environments is supposed to make learners spend more time on language and make them be exposed to language more (Liu, 2013). Research has shown that factors such as: access to technology experience tools, learning preferences, study habits, purposes, goals, lifestyles, and personal traits can seriously affect the student's success in the online-learning process (Schrump & Hong, 2002).

Other researchers' findings clearly indicate that the learners' attitude towards online-learning is crucial in taking advantage of online-learning. The same goes for foreign language learning online – the success of the online-learning process depends on the students' efforts and attitudes, or in other words, the effectiveness of online-learning is in fact tied to the effectiveness of its users.

Research methodology

The study was conducted on a convenient sample of 53 university students majoring in English Literature and ESP/FSP elected from three different faculties (Faculty of Education; Faculty of Information and Communication Technologies and Faculty of Law) at “St. Kliment Ohridski” University – Bitola, Macedonia. In this study a tailor-made questionnaire was applied to analyze the students' experience in the foreign language (English and French) online classes. It was compiled by means of the online survey software, SURVIO.COM and was distributed electronically to university students. This questionnaire includes 25 questions in which the students give their opinions on the organization of the online classes, the electronic platforms

they use, the scope of the lectures, their class activities etc. The type of these questions is multiple choices and open-ended. The study is both qualitative and quantitative in nature.

The study is based on the following three hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1. The students face certain technology–related difficulties in the course of the online foreign language classes (e.g. unstable Internet connection, computer glitches, etc.)

Hypothesis 2. The students feel motivated to take part in the online foreign language classes, but their motivation does not stem from the advantages of using the Internet during the classes; it results from the fact that, rather than going to University, now, they attend the classes from the comfort of their own home.

Hypothesis 3. The majority of the students believe that the online foreign language teaching is more efficient than the traditional classroom teaching.

Results

Fifty–three students filled in the questionnaire; half of them (50%) are English majors at the Faculty of Education (50%); 40% study English for Specific Purposes (ESP) at the Faculty of Information and Communication Technologies, and 10% of them study French for Specific Purposes (FSP) at the Faculty of Law. One third, i.e. 30.2 % of the interviewed students are in the first year of their university studies; 13.2 % are secondary year students; 22.6 % are third year students and 34.0 % are fourth year students.

Regarding the platforms for online learning, the majority of the students (88.7%) state that they use Meet.google for their foreign language classes. The rest use Zoom (17.0%), Google hangouts (17.0%) and Google classroom (18.9%).

As to how often they have online foreign language classes, 47.2% of the interviewed students state once a week; 24.5% twice a week, and 28.3% more than twice a week. This discrepancy in the frequency of the online foreign language classes can be attributed to the fact that half of students are English majors and have a number of different English courses per week. The rest of the students who are majoring in ICTs and Law, on the other hand, have one online ESP/FSP lecture per week, as the foreign language courses are usually elective and a rather limited space is allocated to them in the respective study programs.

One of the questions in the questionnaire was intended to disclose whether the students feel motivated to attend the online foreign language classes. The students' responses show that the percentage of those who feel motivated (50.9%) is very close to those who do not feel motivated (49.1%).

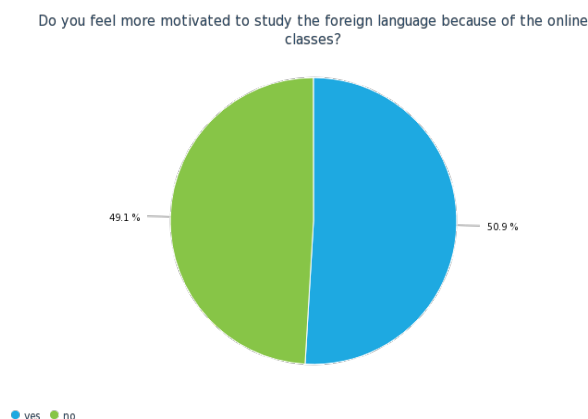


Chart 1

Students' motivation, or rather their lack of motivation for attending online foreign language classes, can be directly linked with the positive and the negative sides of this novel mode of distant teaching/learning. The responses of the "motivated" students, who are in favour of the online foreign language classes, and the advantages of online classes, can be divided into two separate groups. The first group, which encompasses 65% of the respondents, subsumes the answers related to the conditions under which the online classes are realised (e.g. the comfort of one's home); the absence of stress (the students feel much more safe and secure at their home, and, consequently, they feel more self-confident and are more active during the online classes); the saving of finances and time due to the absence of commuting, and the opportunity not to miss classes even when one does not feel quite well. The other group of students, which is significantly smaller than the previous one (35 %), locates the advantages of online classes in the benefits they obtain from using the Internet during the foreign language classes. Namely, the students, in that respect, explain that they have access to a number of Internet resources that are readily available to them when they face certain dilemmas and uncertainties. Thus, they claim they acquire knowledge in a fast and efficient way, and, as a consequence, have more time to come up with well-rounded and insightful answers.

The other group of responses coming from the "unmotivated" students, on the other hand, reveal that the students attribute their lack of motivation to the fact that they cannot follow their online lectures and remain fully focused the entire time, as they would normally be during the traditional classes. More specifically, 26.9% of these students complain about the frequent distractions that appear in their home environment as well as the computer glitches and the poor Internet connection at times, all of which divert their attention from the online lectures. In addition, some are displeased by the absence of a real face-to-face interaction in

the form of debates and discussions, which, according to them, contributes to creating a rather monotonous atmosphere and makes the online classes so unlike the vibrant and dynamic traditional classes. One portion of the students even claim that learning a foreign language online is not as productive as learning it in a regular class as sometimes they cannot fully understand some of the explanations and the exercises they are supposed to do due to the lack of face-to-face contact with their teacher. Moreover, some of the students complain about the increased amount of homework assignments they get now as part of the distant learning and view it as an inconvenience. Still, the majority of them state that they do their homework assignments and submit them to their teachers on a regular basis, which only confirms that they are fully aware of the significant role homework assignments play in acquiring new knowledge and obtaining good grades.

The students were also asked if they take an active part in the online classes. The results show that there is no big difference between the percentage of students who claim that they were more active during the traditional classes (22.6%) and the percentage of those who say that they are more active now, i.e. during the online classes (28.3%). Approximately, half of the students (45.3%) claim that they are, more or less, as active now as they used to be previously during their traditional classes. Only few students (3.8%) state that they are not active at all during the online foreign language classes, but, unfortunately, they do not provide the reason why they prefer to attend the lectures in such a passive manner.

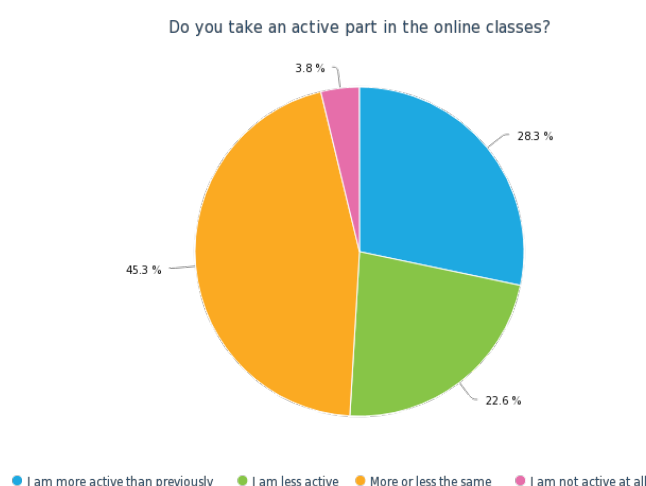


Chart 2

Despite the advantages of online teaching, the results obtained from the questionnaire point to the fact that the majority of the students are more in favour of the traditional way of teaching and learning (60.4%). Nevertheless, the relatively high percentage of students (39.6%)

who maintain that online foreign language teaching is more efficient than the traditional classroom teaching should not be ignored nor downplayed. Furthermore, one should not neglect the relatively high average grade, 4 on a scale from 1 to 5, with which the students assess the quality of their online foreign language classes in general.

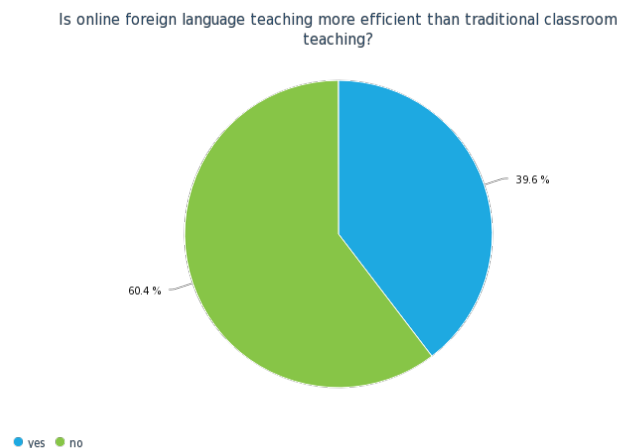


Chart 3

The finding that a significant portion of the students are in favour of the novel distant mode of learning can be further validated by the students' comments concerning the mode in which they would prefer to take their foreign language exam- online or in the traditional way. Namely, 63.5% of the students selected the option for sitting the exam online, and 36.5% chose the traditional paper-and-pan exams. The reasons they state for taking the final exam online range from health concerns and taking precautions due to the Covid-19 pandemic, to online exams being faster and consequently more practical and time-saving. A small portion of the students even state that they have never taken an exam online and that they are curious to experience that. The remaining 36.5% prefer to take their exams in the traditional way because they are not absolutely positive that they will do their best online due to the time-related stress as well as the possible computer glitches, and other technology-related malfunctions. However, they also admit that online exams would leave more room for cheating and other such irregularities which would drastically diminish the objectivity of their final results.

A thorough comparison of the results obtained from this research, points to an obvious 'incongruity' between the relatively high percent of students (63.5%) who are in favour of taking exams online and the relatively high percent of those who feel "unmotivated" to attend

online foreign language classes (49.1%) and who consider online teaching less efficient than the traditional teaching (60.4%). These findings suggest that when it comes to the process of teaching and learning a foreign language, the students attach a far greater importance to the social dimension of the process and the direct contact they have with their teacher and fellow students than to the Internet-related advantages that online classes so profusely offer. Conversely, as far as the exams are concerned, the practical side of the Internet is much more valued and comes to the forefront.

Conclusion

The general conclusion that can be drawn from this research is that the students are quite successful in coping with the new mode of online foreign language learning. The negative aspects of online teaching and learning they draw attention to are mostly of technical nature and include unstable Internet connection, computer glitches as well as lack of direct interaction with the teacher which is an extremely demotivating factor for some of the students.

Nevertheless, all these drawbacks are highlighted in the responses of only a small percentage of students, which, in turn, leads us to refute our first hypothesis that very few students experience computer-related issues which obstruct the smooth flow of their online foreign language classes.

On the other hand, the results of the analysis show that our second hypothesis is only partly valid. Namely, despite our expectations that the majority of the students feel motivated to attend the online foreign language classes, the percentage of the “motivated” and the “unmotivated” students turned out to be approximately the same. Still, our hypothesis is confirmed in part since we correctly foresaw that the students’ motivation does not stem from the advantages of using the Internet during the classes, but, from the fact that, rather than going to University, now, they could attend classes from the comfort of their own home. In fact, a very high percentage of the “motivated” students (65%) in their answers highlighted a number of advantages which apart from the study-from-home possibility, also include the fact that, now, no time nor money is wasted on commuting to and from university. Only 35% of the motivated students dwell on the advantages that stem from using the Internet resources in a real time during the lectures.

Although the percentage of the motivated students is almost identical with the percentage of the unmotivated students, the research shows that the majority of the students believe that online foreign language classes are less efficient than the traditional ones. This finding, in fact, disputes the validity of our third hypothesis.

The fact that a high percentage of the students are motivated to attend online classes, but, still, if given the option to choose they would still opt for the traditional classes, we believe, points to the necessity of improving a range of aspects of online foreign language teaching in order to overcome the current obstacles and to eliminate all its present weak spots, especially, in view of the fact that this novel way of online distant teaching might be a requirement in the future again.

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